

Read 1-7

Factor—Do We Fear the Right Things? Lee notes that human beings tend to overestimate the dangers of rare, vivid events while disregarding the dangers of everyday, commonplace events. Here are a few of the latter that you might present to your students.

1. Books. Each year 10,683 U.S. citizens lose their battle with what the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's National Electronic Injury Surveillance System calls "books, magazines, albums, or scrapbooks." Another 1,490 are clobbered by magazine racks or bookends. What's happening? Karen Miller of the American Library Association explains, "I could offer up things like broken toes when books fall, losing one's balance when reaching for books, and repetitive stress from shelving them. Magazines could also become dangerous if the staples are loose and scrape the skin." Back injuries from moving overloaded books is common. Heavy school bags are also a problem. In 2003, a Hong Kong schoolboy died when his heavy book bag pulled him over the railing of a high-rise apartment building.
2. Chairs. Chairs are more than 13 times as likely to cause injuries as chain saws. More than 410,000 Americans have seating mishaps each year. Most are injuries from falls as people, for example, lean back too far in their office chairs. Most lower-back pain is caused by long stretches of chair sitting. Five children met their death by unzipping bean bag chairs, crawling inside, and suffocating.
3. Cotton swabs. These bathroom tools send more people to the hospital than razor blades or shavers. Why? Contrary to directions on the package, people use them to clean their ears. Experts claim that using cotton swabs to remove earwax is like using a broom on a dirt floor. You merely move things around. The swab pushes the gunk farther down the ear canal where it causes bigger problems. And between 1992 and 1997, more than 100 people in the United States experienced a serious eardrum injury as a result of cleaning their ears with swabs.
4. Hospitals. Deaths attributable to hospital-acquired infections kill more people annually than car crashes and homicides combined. In fact, 1 of every 20 people who enter a hospital leaves with an infection he or she did not have before. Infections affect nearly 2 million people each year; between 20,000 and 90,000 die from them.
5. Natural foods. Healthy fruits and vegetables, even those grown without pesticides, contain cancer-causing nitrates. The National Academy of Science reports that 72 percent of nitrate exposure to the mouth and esophagus comes from vegetables and only about 9 percent comes from cured meats. The

only difference between processed and organic foods is that the former have synthetic chemicals and the latter get their chemicals from nature.

6. Stairs. An estimated 1091 American stair climbers are killed annually and an astounding 769,400 are injured. Missteps can kill you. An extensive study of stair use revealed that a noticeable misstep occurs every 2222 steps. Generally, people misjudge the distance and plant one of their feet wrong. It takes just one-quarter of an inch difference between where the stair is and where you expect to be to throw you off balance.
7. Staying in bed. Annually, 411,689 people in the United States experience injuries related to beds, mattresses, and pillows. How about putting up side rails, the kind used in hospitals and nursing homes? From 1985 to 2001, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration received 479 reports of patients becoming trapped in hospital beds, and of these, 297 died.

Lee, L. (2004). *100 most dangerous things in everyday life and what you can do about them*. New York: Broadway Books.

Classroom Exercise: The Overconfidence Phenomenon

The tendency to overestimate the accuracy of our current knowledge is a powerful phenomenon and readily demonstrated in class.

- a. Perhaps the simplest demonstration of the tendency is to have students predict their score on a multiple-choice or another type of short-answer test immediately after they have completed it (have them note their estimate at the top of the test). The majority will overestimate the number of questions they got right. While the strength of this tendency will depend to some degree on the amount of feedback they have received on previous tests, I have found students continue to overestimate throughout the semester.
- b. Handout 7B-6 presents several questions like those used by Kahneman and Tversky in assessing overconfidence. If your students are as correct as they are confident, only 2 percent of their responses should be wrong. Thus, if each of 50 students responds to the 10 questions, there should be a total of 10 errors ($50 \times 10 \times 0.02 = 10$). The actual proportion of errors will be more than 10 times that. After students have completed the questions, you may wish to collect, shuffle, and redistribute them so that students need not report their own mistakes. By a show of hands, count the number of errors for each item after providing the correct answers below. Overconfidence will be obvious.

Everyday Risks?